

Dialogue: The Spice of Fiction

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Dialogue is one of the most effective tools of the fiction writer's craft. It can be used to portray character, to set the scene of the action, and to unravel or complicate the plot. Most important, dialogue enables the reader to identify at once with the character and become immediately involved in the story.

This is especially necessary in children's fiction today. The space-age child, brought up on capsules—the comic-strip “balloon,” the TV wrapup, even the textbook notes that extract information and feed it to him in pill form—has neither time nor patience for long pages of descriptive narrative. He wants to be in the thick of the action, and it's the writer's job to get him there. Using dialogue is one way of doing so.

In Indian children's fiction, unfortunately dialogue is one of the least used and developed of techniques, partly because our story-telling tradition relies heavily on indirect narration, partly because children's fiction, as such, is itself new.

For vernacular writers, dialogue may come more easily, but for those writing in English there is an added handicap. We are writing in a language that is ours and yet not ours. It is ours because we use it as much as our own tongues; yet, because it has not grown out of this landscape, English cannot express certain nuances of our life. And that fluent mixture of

English and vernacular that most of us use in everyday speech looks affected and artificial in print. However, the advantages of skilful use of dialogue are so many that it's well worth the effort of writing it.

Dialogue as Character

Speech is character. The moment a person opens his mouth, he tells you a great deal about himself—not only what he means to but also often what he doesn't mean to. Whether he's impulsive or cautious, volatile or dull and plodding, warm-hearted and generous or selfish and mean—all this shows in his speech. Thus letting your story people speak for themselves is a sure way to reveal the essence of each and also their relationship to one another.

But it's vital that each speaks in *character*. If your heroine is a bouncy, impatient tomboy, she's unlikely to say, “Madam, I have consumed with relish the sweetmeats you so generously brought me.” On the other hand, if your hero is a pedantic “encyclopedia” type, he might very well speak that way.

In the opening pages of Alcott's old favorite, *Little Women*, for instance, the personality of each of the four sisters is shown at once through their conversation.

But deft characterization through dia-

logue need not be confined to stories about real people, as E.B. White shows in another classic, *Charlotte's Web*. Listen to this barnyard conversation between Templeton, the nasty rat, Charlotte, the learned spider, and Wilbur, the naive little pig:

"Look," began Templeton in his sharp voice, "you say you have seven goslings. There were eight eggs. What happened to the other egg? Why didn't it hatch?"

"It's a dud, I guess," said the goose.

"What are you going to do with it?" continued Templeton, his little round beady eyes fixed on the goose.

"You can have it," replied the goose. "Roll it away and add it to that nasty collection of yours." ... the entire company watched in disgust as the rat rolled it away. Even Wilbur who could eat almost anything, was appalled. "Imagine wanting a junky old rotten egg.!" he muttered.

"A rat is a rat," said Charlotte. She laughed a tinkling little laugh. "But, my friends, if that ancient egg ever breaks, this barn will be untenable."

"What's that mean?" asked Wilbur.

"It means nobody will ever be able to live here on account of the smell. A rotten egg is a regular stink bomb."

Even in picture books, dialogue, carefully used, can provide thumbnail character sketches, as, for instance, in Beatrix Potter's books. In the tale of Mrs. Tittlemouse the entire personality of Mrs. Tittlemouse—the fussy housewife who's forever scrubbing and polishing waxing her house and furniture—shows when she clatters her dustpan at a beetle that's invaded her burrow, crying, "Shoo! Shoo, little dirty feet!"

Conversation not only shows each individual's personality but also reveals the relationships between them. For example, in *The Hidden Pool*, by Ruskin Bond, the good-natured chaffing exchanged between Laurie and the two Indian boys shows the genuine and warm friendship that exists between them.

Dialogue as Setting

While it's necessary to describe the

scene of the action, long stretches of unrelieved description, however lyrical, can get boring. Here conversation makes a handy means of setting the scene. Nilima Sinha uses it effectively in *The Chandipur jewels*.

"We're almost there," said Rakesh, as they rounded a bend. In front of them appeared the walls of an ancient fort.

"Oh, how grand!" exclaimed Praveen, quite impressed. "What a huge fort. Does anyone live here?"

"I do," said Rakesh, to everyone's surprise. "The fort is not completely abandoned. My family still occupies its share of the rooms."

"Your great grandfather closed up his half and went to live in the palace. He found the fort too gloomy. But my great grandfather continued to live here and that's where I stay."

"It must be quite dull living in this place," exclaimed Sunil, looking at the old grey walls. "I certainly wouldn't like to stay here."...

They went past the fort, with its massive wooden doors studded with rusty iron nails.

"Do you see the little holes in the door?" asked Rakesh. "Those are bullet marks. During the Mutiny, British soldiers tried to break into the fort."

"The 1857 Mutiny, wasn't it?"

Dialogue is especially effective for introducing an unusual, out-of-the-way setting or for creating atmosphere. In *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Compton Burnett, the desolate English moor and the strange house take on an added grimness when described by the tight-lipped housekeeper to Mary, just arrived from India.

"Eh! We're on the moor now sure enough," said Mrs. Medlock. The carriage lamps shed a yellow light on a rough-looking road which seemed to be cut through bushes and low-growing things which ended in the great expanse of dark apparently spread out before and around them. A wind was rising and making a singular, wild, low rushing sound.

"It's—it's not the sea, is it?" said Mary, looking round at her companion.

"No, not it," answered Mrs. Medlock. "Nor it isn't fields nor mountains, it's just miles and miles and miles of wild land that nothing grows on but heather and gorse and broom, and nothing lives on but wild ponies and sheep."

"I feel as if it might be the sea, if there were

water on it," said Mary. "It sounds like the sea just now."

"That's the wind blowing through the bushes," Mrs Medlock said. "It's a wild, dreary enough place to my mind, though there's plenty that likes it—particularly when the heather's in bloom."

Dialogue as Plot

In a story there's no room for idle conversation. Even seemingly aimless talk must take the reader somewhere—filling in the background, providing clues to what might come, carrying the action forward. A lot of necessary background can be compressed into a few lines of dialogue, as for example, Madeleine L'Engle does in *A Wrinkle in Time*.

Meg the heroine of this science fiction novel, thinks of herself as plain and stupid, which is how her schoolmates (and teachers) dub her, but who is actually super-intelligent—a trait which helps her cope with the most bizarre situations later in the story. She is fiercely protective of her little brother, Charles Wallace, reputed to be "subnormal," but who is really very bright and has a unique capacity to read people's minds—a capacity on which much of the action later pivots. All this background is sketched through the dialogue.

"I've heard that clever people often have sub-normal children," Meg had once overheard. "The two boys seem to be nice, regular children, but that unattractive girl and the baby boy certainly aren't all there."

"Don't worry about Charles Wallace, Meg," her father had once told her.

"There's nothing the matter with his mind. He just does things in his own way and in his own time."

"I just don't want him to grow up to be dumb, like me," Meg had said. "Oh, my darling, you're not dumb," her father answered. "You're like Charles Wallace. Your development has to go at its own pace. It just doesn't happen to be the usual pace. ...You just wait till Charles Wallace starts to talk. You'll see."

Dialogue for Eye Appeal

Many readers, especially beginning readers, are unconsciously discouraged

when confronted with a page of solid print. Thus conversation in print also adds visual appeal to the page, opening up the solid text and inviting the reader into the story. On the other hand, too much dialogue gives a choppy appearance also, so the best combination is a mixture of narrative, indirect speech, and direct speech.

A Multipurpose Tool

While the functions of dialogue can be listed separately for the sake of analysis, skilfully written dialogue really serves several or all of these functions at once. As Charles N. Heckelmann puts it in "Six Functions of Dialogue" (Fiction Writer's Market 1981, pages 211-217), "Dialogue should not interrupt the narrative. Rather, it should push the story along, providing information that is not given by means of exposition, helping reveal the characters' emotional reactions to events and spoken statements, while also adding to the complete flesh-and-blood portrait of the men and women in the story."

It is an admirable short-hand, as it were, in which the author can compress a great deal that has to be said, often implying much that cannot be stated. Take, for example, the first passage, already quoted, from *A Wrinkle in Time*. It tells the reader much that is not explicitly stated: Meg's constant anxiety for her brother, her poor image of herself, her parents' loving protectiveness of her and Charles. But at the same time this conversation also sets the mood—Meg's always feeling at odds with her contemporaries—and provides clues to the action that comes later. A succeeding passage makes this even clearer.

"You don't know the meaning of moderation, do you, my darling?" Mrs Murry asked. "A happy medium is something I wonder if you'll ever learn. That's a nasty bruise the Henderson boy gave you. ...His mother...seemed to think it was all your fault."

"I suppose that depends on how you look at it," Meg said. "Usually no matter what happens people think it's my fault, even if I have nothing to do with it at all. But I'm sorry I tried to fight him. It's just been an awful week. And I'm full of bad feeling."

Mrs Murry stroked Meg's shaggy head. "Do you know why?"

"I *hate* being an old man out," Meg said. "It's hard on Sandy and Dennys too. I don't know if they're really like everybody else, or if they're just able to pretend they are. I try to pretend, but it isn't any help."

"You're much too straightforward to be able to pretend to be what you aren't," Mrs Murry said. "I'm sorry, Meglet. May be if father were here he could help you, but I don't think I can do anything till you've managed to plough through some more time. Then things will be easier for you. But that isn't much help right now, is it?"

"Maybe if I weren't so repulsive-looking—maybe if I were pretty like you—"

"Mother's not a bit pretty; she's beautiful," Charles Wallace announced.

"Therefore I bet she was awful at your age."

"How right you are," Mrs Murry said. "Just give yourself time, Meg."

This conversation reveals a great deal not only about Meg's appearance but also her character and Charles Wallace's. It also shows the close, loving relationship between the children and mother. At the same time it implies an unusual situation, and hints at the father's absence, which is really a disappearance—the pivot on which the plot hinges.

Even a single sentence can achieve this multiple effect. The opening line of *Little Women* is an example.

"Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," grumbled Jo, lying on the rug."

It's the classic "hook" for the reader, whose curiosity is aroused at once. Why won't there be presents? What's going on? It also points to what's coming in the action of the story and it's a clue, too, to Jo's impulsive, volatile nature.

The How of it

Given all these advantages that it offers, how does one learn to write clear, sparkling dialogue? The first step, I think, would be to listen—to real people talking, especially children, until the cadences and rhythms of their speech and individual mannerisms become familiar. One must listen also to the story characters and really *hear* them in imagination. Read their conversation aloud to hear the actual sound of the words—to see if they *ring* right.

Second, read, read, read. See how accomplished authors handle dialogue. Harper Lee's prize-winning novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is an excellent example of dialogue handled so adroitly that one never realises the author is really moving on three levels—the indirect narrative, the adult's grownup speech, and the children's—they speak like children only in their direct speech—presenting the action from a child's point of view. Richmal Crompton's William books—the ungrammatical conversations of the Outlaws; the vague, gentle speech of Mrs Brown; the sardonic, clipped sentences of Mr. Brown—are masterly examples of dialogue.

Thirdly, write. And write and write and write some more. There's no shortcut. Dialogue, of course, is not the only requisite for good writing—it cannot really rescue a dull story—but is just one strand in the whole intricate weaving of a story. As Heckelmann says, in the same article, "Dialogue is one element among many that adds to the total picture, the composite of action, complication, conversation, motivation, basic theme, and setting that goes to make up a story."

No style is good that is not fit to be spoken or read aloud with effect.

—William Hazlitt